

Educational Policy in Vietnam for Sustainable Development in the 21st Century

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Abstract

This article explores the evolution of Vietnam's education policies and their impact on the country's economy towards sustainable development. It analyzes three distinct phases: the early years of Doi Moi (1986-1995), the period from 1996 to 2020, and the current educational landscape from 2021 onwards. Vietnam has made significant strides, reflected in improved global education rankings and a rising Human Capital Index. However, several challenges persist, including resource allocation disparities, educational inequalities, corruption, and inadequate teacher remuneration. To address these issues, policy recommendations have been provided. These encompass equitable resource allocation, measures to ensure education equality and accessibility, anti-corruption strategies, improved teacher development and well-being, curriculum modernization, community engagement, and enhanced research and data collection. Implementing these recommendations collectively can help Vietnam build a more equitable, efficient, and high-quality education system that supports sustainable development. Collaboration among stakeholders is essential for the successful implementation of these policies and the realization of Vietnam's vision for comprehensive and inclusive education in the 21st century.

Keywords: Vietnam, Educational Policy, Sustainable Development

1. Introduction

According to the 2021 ranking of the best countries in education by USNEWS, Vietnam secured the 59th position out of 78 countries, marking a notable improvement of 6 places compared to 2020. Concurrently, indicators of human resource quality training also exhibited significant enhancements. Data from the World Bank for the year 2020 indicates that Vietnam's Human Capital Index (HCI) experienced a decade-long increase from 0.66 to 0.69 between 2010 and 2020 (CEIC Data, 2020). Notably, Vietnam's HCI continues to surpass the average of countries within the same income bracket, despite lower levels of public expenditure on health, education, and social protection. In the East Asia-Pacific region, Vietnam stands out as one of the nations with the highest scores in the Human Capital Index, as per the World Bank's assessment. These findings underscore the positive outcomes stemming from Vietnam's recent policies and investments in education development. Particularly, the Vietnamese government has been placing increasing emphasis on education policies, recognizing them as the bedrock for Vietnam's journey toward sustainable development across economic, societal, and environmental dimensions, guided by the vision of ensuring quality, equitable, and inclusive education while promoting lifelong learning opportunities for all.

Nevertheless, despite the strides made in pursuing sustainable development through the aforementioned education policies, Vietnam's education system still grapples with several challenges. These include issues such as comparatively lower quality and efficiency when measured against some ASEAN countries, an imbalanced higher education model, and insufficient school facilities. Although progress has been achieved in promoting equity in education and training, numerous problems persist. The education system remains heavily reliant on examinations and academic achievements.

Hence, this article aims to provide, firstly, an overview of the characteristics of Vietnam's education policies throughout different periods, assessing their impact and effectiveness on Vietnam's sustainable development in the past, present, and future. It is divided into 3 phases: (1) Vietnam's education policy during the early years of Doi Moi (1986-1995), Vietnam's education policy from 1996 to 2020, secondly, it will consider shortcomings in Vietnam's education system and policies consolidate and finally, this paper will provide policy recommendations to assist the Vietnamese education system in nurturing a workforce capable of meeting the demands of the digital age in the 21st century.

2. The development of Vietnam's education system from the past to the present

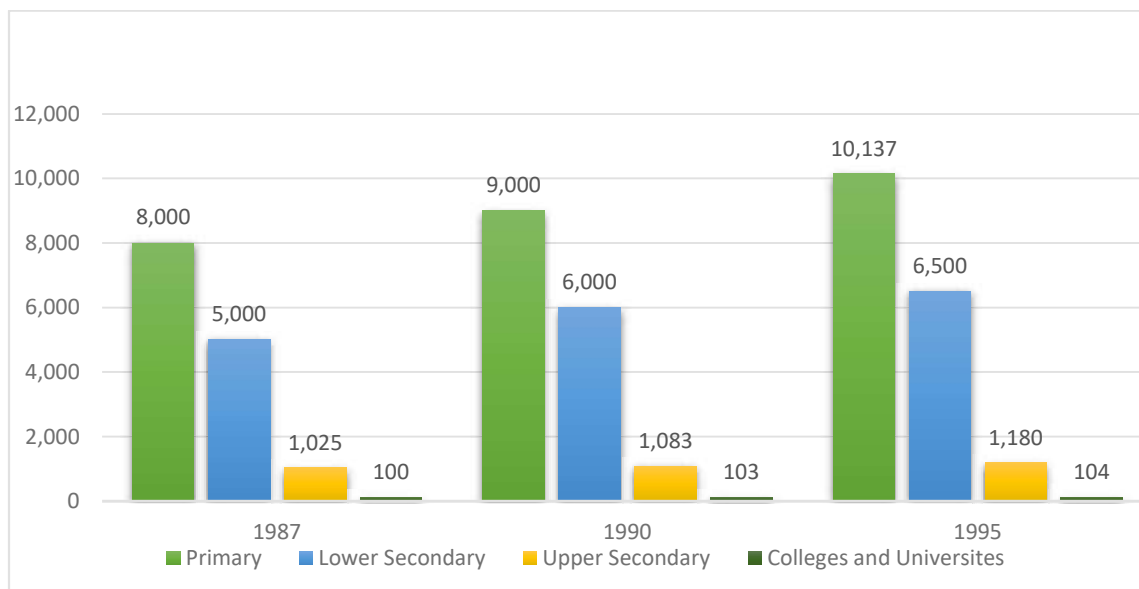
2.1. Vietnam's education policy during the early years of Doi Moi (1986-1995)

Before the commencement of the Doi Moi policy, which aimed at comprehensive development across economic and social sectors, Vietnam's education system was still in its nascent stages. It was divided into two distinct systems: the North operated on a 10-year model, while the South followed a 12-year model. During this period, the primary focus of human resource development was to serve the nation's resistance efforts and contribute to the building of the country.

However, the transformative phase began in earnest after 1986, when the Communist Party of Vietnam adopted the comprehensive Doi Moi policy. This policy marked the initiation of substantial efforts to cultivate a high-quality Vietnamese education system, characterized by several noteworthy milestones:

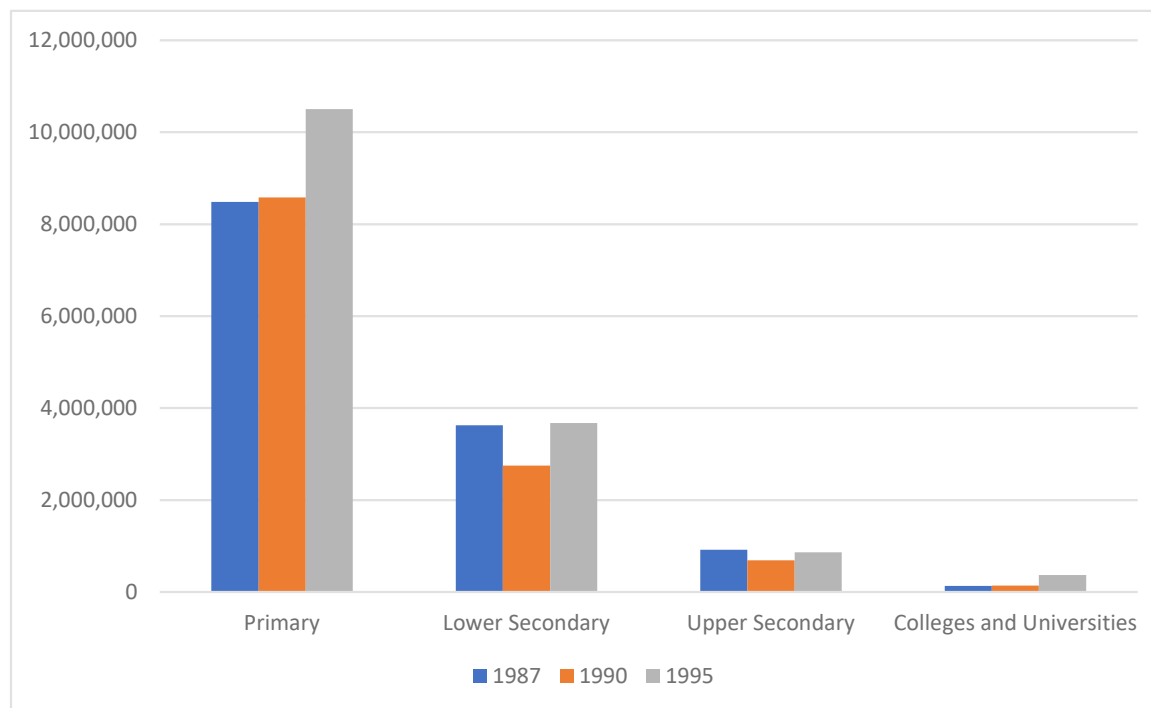
In 1990, the official establishment of Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training marked a pivotal moment in shaping the nation's educational framework. Simultaneously, the government issued uniform regulations governing educational levels, spanning from kindergarten to university. In 1993, a landmark policy was promulgated, mandating the uniform implementation of a 12-year general education system nationwide. Additionally, the government embraced an educational socialization policy, facilitating the establishment of private schools and diversifying the educational landscape.

Furthermore, as an incentive for academic excellence, the state implemented a policy sending high-achieving students from university and college entrance exams to study abroad in countries like the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, and German Democratic Republic, with a commitment to return and contribute to the nation. Consequently, this era witnessed significant accomplishments in Vietnamese education, as evidenced by the rapid increase in student enrollment at all levels and the substantial expansion of educational institutions. These achievements reflected Vietnam's commitment to building a strong educational foundation for its people. (Ministry of Education and Training, 2016)



Picture 1: The count of educational institutions in Vietnam from the initiation of the Doi Moi policy in 1986 to the year 1995

(Source: http://www.hids.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=1a0c7fd2-3ef6-4637-a549-5fcbe5d0060b&groupId=13025)



Picture 2: Total Student Enrollment at All Education Levels in Vietnam (1987-1995)

(Source: http://www.hids.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=1a0c7fd2-3ef6-4637-a549-5fcbe5d0060b&groupId=13025)

2.2. Vietnam's education policy from 1996 to 2020

From 1996 to the 2000s, the Vietnamese government recognized this period as crucial for accelerating the country's industrialization and modernization efforts. Economic growth needed to be rapid and effective, but it had to be harmonized with sustainable development goals. To achieve this objective, education development became a top national priority within Vietnam's 5-year socio-economic development plans. Resolution No. 29-NQ/TW, dated November 4, 2013, titled "Enhancing Education and Training for Industrialization and Modernization in a Socialist Market Economy," was approved during the 8th Central Conference (XI session). This resolution underscores the pivotal role of education as a top national priority and a key development investment, receiving paramount attention in socio-economic development programs and plans. (Hiep, et., 2022). Several noteworthy education policies were implemented to align with the overarching aim of sustainable national development, including:

Substantial investment in education, with an allocation of approximately 10% to 20% of the national budget, a figure considered high by global standards. This allocation consistently increased over the years.

Implementation of policies aimed at encouraging the development of a highly skilled workforce, with a focus on nurturing scientific and technological talent capable of addressing the challenges outlined in the scientific and technological development program.

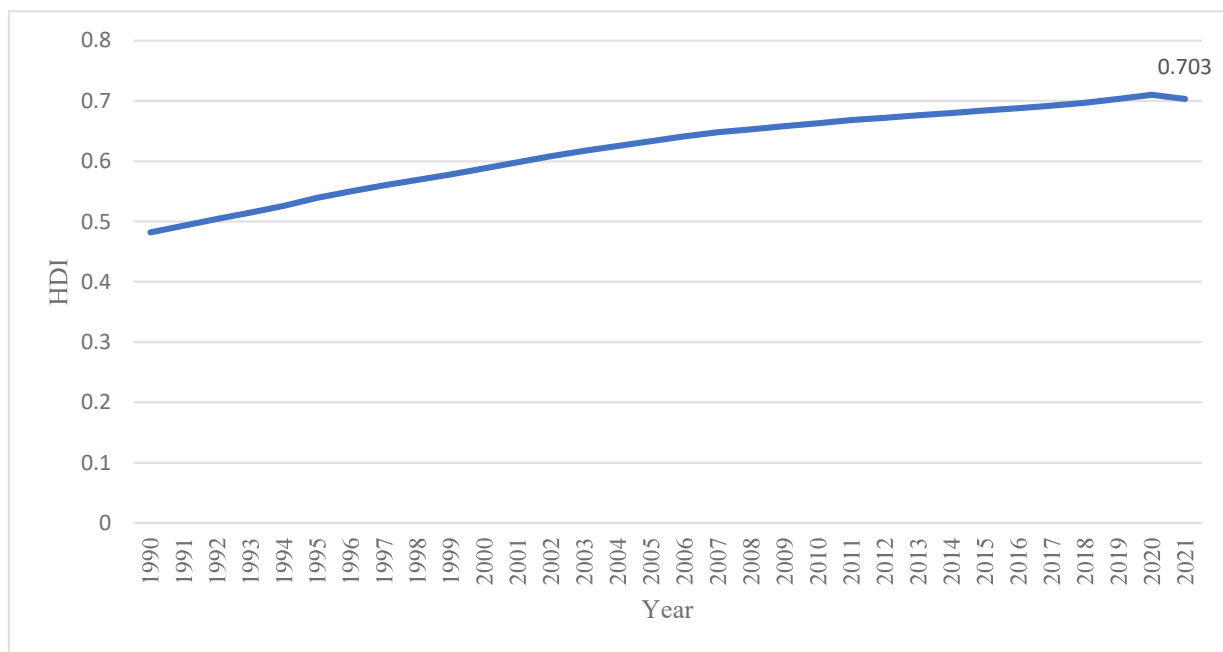
Recognition, support, and promotion of talent in various fields, including science and technology, culture and the arts, economic and social management, as well as production and business management. Mechanisms were established to encourage the participation of

international organizations, foreign individuals, and overseas Vietnamese in education, research, and the application and transfer of science and technology within Vietnam.

Strengthening international academic and cultural exchanges while addressing educational disparities between urban areas and remote, hilly countryside regions.

In 2000, a significant education reform policy was introduced, completely overhauling the content of textbooks within the general education system. In 2012, policies were enacted to grant universities and colleges autonomy in various aspects, such as organization and personnel, financial management, property ownership, training, scientific and technological research, and international collaboration, all while ensuring the quality of education.

These policies had a positive and lasting impact on the sustainable development of Vietnam's human resources in the contemporary era. Key achievements included: The nationwide achievement of literacy elimination and universalization of primary education by 2000, universalization of lower secondary education by 2010, and the ongoing effort to provide universal early childhood education for 5-year-olds, along with improvements in adult literacy. By 2014, Vietnam boasted 24,300 PhD holders and 101,000 Masters, reflecting a robust pool of highly educated individuals. Impressive performances by Vietnamese teams in international competitions, such as the Vietnamese Student Union's top-ranking position at the International Mathematics and Science Olympiad in 2019, with 15 gold medals, 14 silver medals, and 7 bronze medals. According to the United Nations Development Organization (UNDP), Vietnam's Human Development Index (HDI) remained nearly constant at 0.703 in 2021, compared to 0.704 in 2019. Notably, Vietnam also moved up two positions in the global rankings, progressing from 117th out of 189 countries in 2019 to 115th out of 191 countries in 2021. (Ho Chi Minh City's Party Committee, 2021)



Picture 3: Vietnam's Human Development Index (HDI) from 1990-2021

(Source: <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/specific-country-data#/countries/VNM>)

2.3. Vietnam's education policy from 2021 to present

In the years 2021-2022, the global outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic profoundly impacted various sectors, including education. Furthermore, the accelerating pace of the 21st-century digital revolution has underscored the need for a new vision in Vietnamese education. This new vision encompasses several key principles:

Education should no longer be confined within the four walls of a traditional school but should be accessible from anywhere and at any time, contingent upon the right mindset and relationships. Educational systems should not be overly rigid but should possess the flexibility to adapt swiftly, contingent upon a consensus among educational stakeholders. Resilient education systems capable of responding to crises are essential for fulfilling their mission in meeting the learning needs of the people and the human resource requirements of socio-economic development. Tertiary education, at the college and university levels, should prioritize the development of human resources equipped with new skills, advanced levels of education, expertise, and the ability to create significant societal value.

During this challenging period, the Vietnamese government has taken practical measures to support the education sector and continues to invest in education to promptly cultivate human resources capable of meeting the demands of sustainable development in the 21st-century digital age. These measures include providing support packages for non-public educational institutions and teachers to facilitate the resumption of teaching activities in the new context. Swiftly implementing preferential credit packages for students and implementing policies to support teachers in delivering online education. Establishing mechanisms for exemptions from social insurance, healthcare contributions, and unemployment benefits for educational staff during epidemics. Increasing investments in information technology infrastructure, internet connectivity, and resources for students to ensure the effective implementation of online teaching methods.

Starting from 2022, in response to the impacts of Covid-19 and the digital age, the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam has initiated policies to develop and digitize educational institutions, particularly at the university level. The aim is to propel Vietnamese higher education towards global standards. Notably, the Ministry has approved the "Project on Enhancing the Application of Information Technology in Management and Support of Teaching-Learning and Scientific Research Activities," designed to enhance the quality of education and training during the period 2020-2025 (Hieu, 2021).

3. Shortcomings in Vietnam's education system and policies

Since 1986, Vietnam has implemented various policies aimed at enhancing the quality of education and transitioning towards the era of digital education, with the goal of producing high-quality human resources to support the country's sustainable development. While these efforts have brought about significant changes and accomplishments in Vietnam's education system, a lingering question arises: why has Vietnam's economy not kept pace with many ASEAN countries? Vietnam's GDP per capita stands at approximately \$4,162.94, ranking 117th out of 200 countries worldwide. This places Vietnam behind countries such as Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, and Thailand, as reported by the Central Economic Commission in 2023. According to experts, Vietnam's policies and education system still exhibit several issues, including the following:

1. The allocation of budgetary resources for education across different levels in Vietnam exhibits inequities

To achieve a developed economy and ensure a high quality of life for its citizens, the government must prioritize the development of highly skilled human resources. However, Vietnam has faced challenges in this regard. Currently, Vietnam allocates over 28% of its budget to primary education and nearly 22% to lower secondary education. In contrast, it allocates only slightly more

than 8% of the total budget to preschool education, a little over 11% to upper secondary education, slightly more than 13% to vocational education, and slightly over 12% to higher education, including universities (Hung, 2016). This allocation pattern results in a high rate of students graduating from primary and secondary school, but a smaller proportion of students continuing to higher education to enhance their skills and career prospects.

Despite having a substantial workforce, Vietnam faces deficiencies in professional knowledge, problem-solving abilities, leadership, and communication skills. As a consequence, labor productivity lags behind that of other countries, such as Singapore (4.4%), Malaysia (17.4%), Thailand (35.2%), the Philippines (48.5%), and Indonesia (48.8%) (Tri et al., 2021). This situation poses a risk to Vietnam's competitive advantage based on low labor costs, potentially diminishing its appeal to foreign investors. Therefore, Vietnam continues to grapple with a shortage of high-quality human resources, which is a crucial factor in driving the country's sustainable development through efficiency and innovation.

2. The disparity in access to education policies between individuals residing in urban and delta regions compared to those in remote areas is a matter of concern

In Hang's research (2018) on education inequality in Vietnam, it is evident that urban areas allocate significantly more funds to education compared to rural areas. This disparity in funding exists across various levels of education in both urban and rural regions. Education inequality remains prevalent, encompassing disparities in literacy rates, educational attainment levels among different regions, ethnic minorities versus the Kinh ethnic group, and the gap between rural and urban areas.

Income inequality further exacerbates these disparities, as the university enrollment rate for the wealthiest 20% is 88 times higher than that of the poorest 20%. Specifically, the enrollment rate for university-age individuals from affluent backgrounds is 26.3%, while it's only 0.3% for those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This stark contrast means that for every one person from the poorest 20% who has the opportunity to attend university, there are 87-88 individuals from the wealthiest 20% who do so. Consequently, there are significant discrepancies in access to education and the benefits of government education support policies between those residing in urban and rural areas, as well as between plain and mountainous regions.

3. The issue of corruption in education persists as a significant concern

As per Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training, educational corruption is discerned in nine key areas: School administration, manipulation of academic scores, unauthorized tutoring, misuse of educational fees, monopoly in textbook production, corruption in teacher recruitment, promotion, and placement, irregularities in construction projects, misappropriation in the procurement of teaching equipment, mishandling of educational project funds. This pervasive issue has resulted in covert inequalities in education, heightened the risk of school dropout for children from financially disadvantaged families, diminished the quality of education, and eroded public trust in the education management system.

4. Remuneration and development policies aimed at enhancing the quality of teachers remain inadequately low

The country is grappling with a shortage of 100,000 teachers, and an alarming number of educators find themselves on informal contracts for extended periods. Some teachers endure such arrangements for up to 20 years, receiving meager monthly salaries of only 2-3 million VND, without enjoying the benefits accorded to public employees. This represents a significant and pressing issue that requires prompt resolution in the near future.

In just 2021 and 2022, the country witnessed the departure of 29,000 teachers from their positions, an unusual phenomenon occurring amid the implementation of a new educational program and an ongoing shortage of educators. Furthermore, the existing salary and allowance framework for teachers suffers from numerous deficiencies, directly impacting the livelihoods, mental well-being, and job performance of a substantial portion of educational professionals. Regrettably, recommendations and proposals regarding policies for teachers have not received the due and timely attention they warrant from the Ministry of Education and Training. (Ministry of Education and Training, 2016).

4. Policy recommendations for the development of Vietnam's education system towards sustainable development

To address the shortcomings in Vietnam's education system and promote sustainable development, several policy recommendations should be considered. These recommendations aim to tackle issues such as resource allocation, educational inequality, corruption, and teacher development. Implementing these policies will contribute to the creation of a more equitable and high-quality education system in Vietnam, ultimately fostering human resources capable of supporting the country's sustainable development.

Table 1: *Policy recommendations for the development of Vietnam's education system towards sustainable development*

Policy Area	Recommendations
Equitable Resource Allocation	Increase funding for preschool education. Reallocate budgetary resources more evenly across all education levels.
Education Equality and Accessibility	Address urban-rural disparities. Implement scholarship programs for poor students. Targeted support for ethnic minorities.
Anti-Corruption Measures	Establish an independent anti-corruption body. Provide whistleblower protection. Integrate ethics education into the curriculum.
Teacher Development and Well-being	Raise teacher salaries and provide clear benefits packages. Invest in professional development opportunities. Develop recruitment and retention strategies. Provide mental health support for teachers.
Modernization of Curriculum and Teaching Methods	Promote technology integration. Encourage innovative, student-centered teaching methods. Integrate life skills education.
Community Engagement	Encourage parent and community involvement in school management. Conduct public awareness campaigns on education's importance.
Research and Data Collection	Invest in data collection and research for evidence-based decision-making.

(1) Equitable resource allocation

Increase investment in preschool education: Allocate a larger portion of the education budget to preschool programs. This will ensure that children receive a strong educational foundation early in life, leading to improved learning outcomes as they progress to higher levels of education (Tri, 2021). Additionally, reallocate budget resources more evenly from primary to higher education to encourage a higher number of students to pursue advanced education and acquire advanced skills.

(2) Education equality and accessibility

Address regional disparities: Implement policies aimed at narrowing the educational gap between urban and rural areas. This involves ensuring an equitable distribution of funds and resources, as well as enhancing infrastructure in remote regions (Nguyen & Ha, 2023). Furthermore, establish financial aid initiatives to guarantee that economically disadvantaged students have equal opportunities for higher education, thereby reducing enrollment disparities based on income. Additionally, develop programs designed to enhance educational opportunities for ethnic minority groups. This includes offering culturally sensitive curricula and improving access to quality education.

(3) Anti-Corruption Measures

Strengthen oversight and accountability: Create an independent body responsible for monitoring and investigating corruption in the education sector, ensuring transparency and accountability (Thi Hoa, 2020). Enact laws and policies that safeguard individuals who report instances of corruption in education, encouraging more people to come forward. Additionally, include ethics education in the curriculum to instill a strong sense of integrity and ethical behavior among both students and educators.

(4) Teacher development and well-being:

Competitive Salaries: Increase teachers' salaries to make the profession more attractive, retain experienced educators, and attract new talent. Establish a clear salary scale and comprehensive benefits package for teachers. Provide ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their skills, teaching methods, and subject knowledge (Tien et al, 2021). A comprehensive strategy to address the shortage of teachers, including targeted recruitment efforts and incentives to encourage teachers to work in underserved areas. Offer Mental Health Support: Provide mental health support services for teachers to help them cope with the challenges of their profession and reduce burnout.

(5) Modernization of curriculum and teaching methods

Digital Integration: Promote the integration of technology in the classroom to enhance the quality of education and prepare students for the digital age (Huy et al, 2021). Foster the use of innovative, student-centered teaching methods that emphasize critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity. Include life skills education in the curriculum to equip students with practical skills for real-world situations (Nguyen et al, 2023).

(6) Community Engagement

Parent and Community Involvement: Encourage active participation of parents and local communities in school management and decision-making processes to create a sense of ownership and accountability (Nguyen & Trent, 2020). Organize campaigns to raise awareness about the importance of education, including its role in sustainable development, to garner public support and engagement.

(7) Research and data collection

Data-Driven Decision Making: Invest in comprehensive data collection and research to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of education policies, enabling informed decisions for ongoing improvement (Hoa et al, 2021).

By implementing these policy recommendations, Vietnam can work towards a more equitable, efficient, and high-quality education system that fosters the development of skilled human resources essential for sustainable economic growth and development. It is essential that these policies are implemented collaboratively, involving government bodies, educators, parents, and the wider community to ensure their success and sustainability.

5. Conclusion

Vietnam has made commendable progress in its education sector over the years, as evident from its improved rankings in global education indices and the continuous growth of its Human Capital Index. The government has recognized the pivotal role of education in sustainable development and has implemented various policies and reforms to nurture a highly skilled workforce and improve access to quality education. These efforts have resulted in significant achievements, including the elimination of illiteracy and the universalization of primary and lower secondary education. However, Vietnam's education system still faces several challenges that need to be addressed to support the country's sustainable development fully. These challenges include resource allocation disparities, educational inequality between urban and rural areas, issues of corruption, and the need for improved teacher remuneration and development. Moreover, there is a pressing need to modernize the curriculum and teaching methods to prepare students for the digital age.

To overcome these challenges and further advance Vietnam's education system towards sustainable development, a set of comprehensive policy recommendations has been outlined. These recommendations encompass equitable resource allocation, measures to promote education equality and accessibility, anti-corruption strategies, teacher development and well-being initiatives, modernization of curriculum and teaching methods, community engagement efforts, and enhanced research and data collection.

Implementing these policy recommendations collectively will lead to a more balanced, efficient, and high-quality education system in Vietnam. By fostering a skilled and motivated workforce and promoting access to education for all, Vietnam can continue its path toward sustainable development, addressing economic, societal, and environmental dimensions. Collaborative efforts involving government bodies, educators, parents, and the broader community will be crucial in ensuring the successful implementation and long-term impact of these policies.

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